

Confederate flag displays

School, county officials embrace teachable moment addressed at rally

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Ten days after a Glenelg High student was disciplined for unfurling a Confederate flag at a football game at River Hill High, county community leaders, school system officials and politicians gathered in front of the county government seat in Ellicott City for a unity rally to protest recent displays of the Confederate flag.

"Every great community has a time it's tested, for without this test there can be no community testimony, no shared vision," County Council Chair Calvin Ball told the approximately 30 people assembled for the rally.

"While there have been incidents that have sought to potentially divide us, there are great people in every part of our county, and we choose not to be divided but to be united, and use this ... as an opportunity where we can come together and make sure that everyone, in every part of our community, feels safe, feels included and feels valued," he said.

Following the Sept. 5 flag display at the football game, on Sept. 10, two Glenelg High students attended school with Confederate flags draped around their necks. The students were told to put the flags away before school started, according to school spokeswoman Rebecca Amani-Dove, who would not say if the students were disciplined.

While Amani-Dove would not comment on specific disciplinary or administrative actions taken against any of three students, she said, "Carrying a flag, in and of itself, is not a violation of the code of conduct."

According to the code of conduct, students can be disciplined for "behavior or dress that interferes with the learning environment" or "the safe and orderly environment" of the school. The code states that punishment can range from a verbal reprimand to expulsion.

Howard County schools Superintendent Renee Foose, who released a statement on Sept. 9 disparaging the display at the game, said the school system would focus on creating a safe learning environment for students and teachers.

"We're enriched by our diversity, and we are committed to ensuring that everything we do keeps our children safe and on the right track for success," Foose

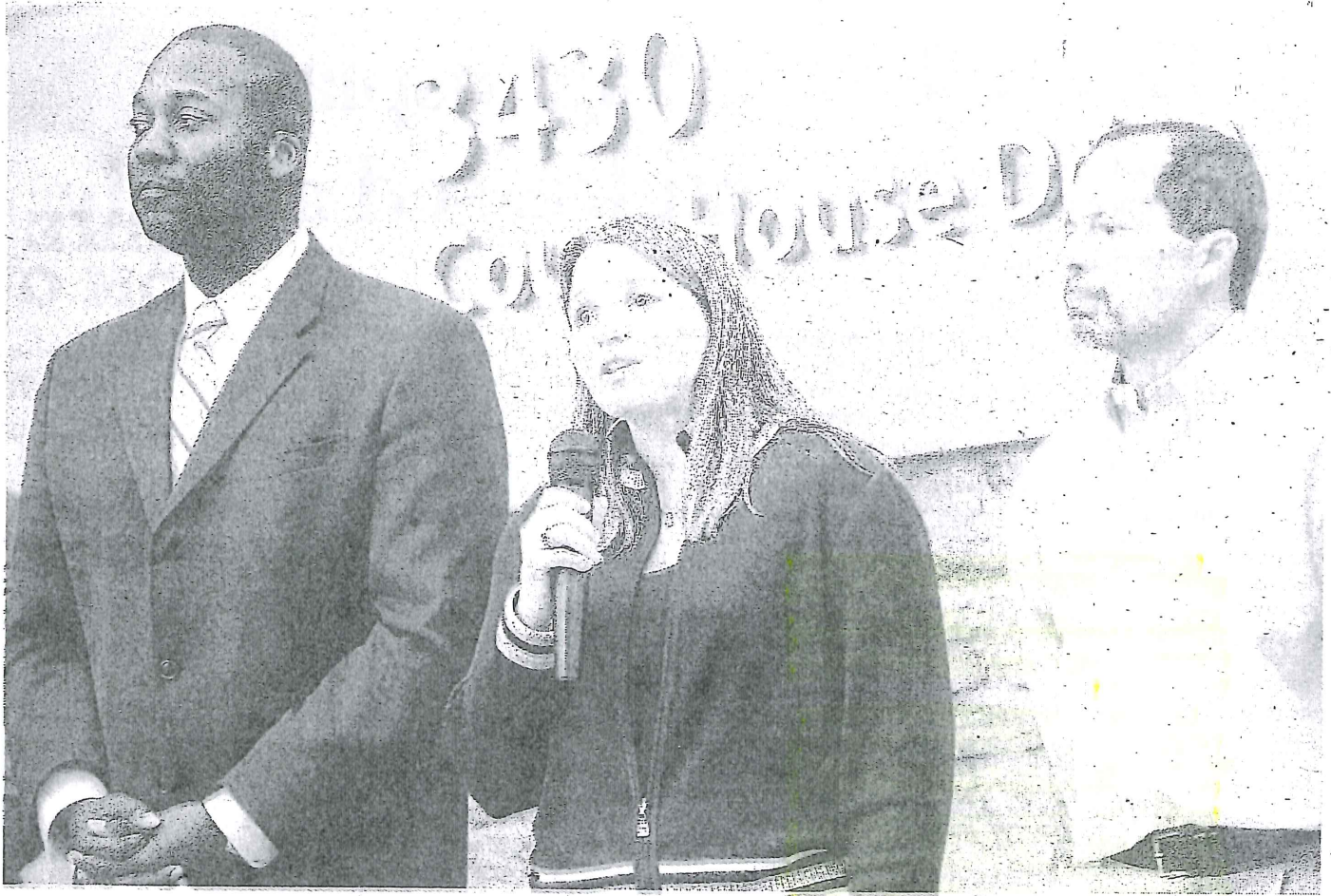
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said.

County Executive Ken Ulman, who released his own statement on Sept. 9 about the display, also spoke at the rally. He said, "Public displays of the Confederate Flag evoke division, hate and subjugation — precisely the opposite of the values we hold in Howard County, and

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STAFF PHOTO BY BRIAN KRISTA

Howard County schools Superintendent Renee Foose addresses the rally, accompanied by County Council Chairman Calvin Ball, left, and Hector Garcia, executive director of FIRM.

in Maryland. We must teach our kids why this is such a hurtful symbol to so many people. We must fight against injustice and intolerance in any form, especially at our schools."

At the rally, the Rev. Robert Turner, a pastor at St. John Baptist Church in Columbia and the second vice president of the African American Community Roundtable, the group that coordinated the rally, addressed an argument shared by some that the Confederate flag is a Southern symbol and does not necessarily have racial overtones.

"To African Americans in Howard County and African Americans in this country, the Confederate flag represents a key part of our history. It represents racism," Turner said. "We've come together to say that we don't share those values here in Howard County."

Sherman Howell, president of the African American Community Roundtable,

said Tuesday that he thinks the incident is rooted in an economic divide, specifically related to housing patterns in the western part of the county.

"I think we are where we are because of a lack of an economically integrated community. ... It's ... constant, ingrained residential segregation that's causing this," he said. "I think we should recognize the fact that, until we deal with the housing patterns, not much is going to change."

At the rally Ball reiterated Foose's earlier sentiment that both incidents provided an opportunity for a teachable moment.

"This is the beginning of a community conversation; a conversation that involves all of us, in every aspect of the county, every aspect of our diverse fabric, whether it's race, it's age, it's religion, it's ethnicity, to ensure that we move forward together, united," he said.